



U.S. Department of Justice
United States Attorney
District of Kansas

NEWS RELEASE

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FORMER TREGO COUNTY SHERIFF CONVICTED OF DRUG AND GUN CHARGES

WICHITA, Kan. – United States Attorney Eric Melgren announced that **Curtis L. Bender**, 37, Lawrence, Kansas, former Trego County Sheriff, was convicted on May 19, 2004, in U.S. District Court in Wichita, Kansas, following a six day jury trial of **one count of conspiracy to possess with the intent to distribute cocaine; two counts of distributing cocaine; one count of attempting to distribute cocaine; and one count of unlawfully possessing a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime.**

Melgren stated that according to evidence presented at trial, from March 22, 2003, through March 25, 2003, Bender, while serving as Trego County Sheriff, conspired with others to distribute cocaine in Trego and Ellis County, Kansas. According to trial evidence, the KBI received a tip in March of 2003 that Bender was attempting to sell cocaine. The KBI investigated and set up, through an undercover officer, controlled buys of cocaine on March 22 and 23, 2003. On March 25, 2003, Bender attempted to distribute approximately 871 grams (approximately 1.92 pounds) of cocaine to an undercover officer and possessed a handgun during this attempted sale. This cocaine was first discovered by an individual who purchased a seized 1994 Dodge Intrepid that had been sold at a sheriff's sale. The cocaine was subsequently discovered in the car, and turned over to Bender, the Trego County Sheriff, for destruction. Bender, rather than destroying the cocaine, kept it and distributed or attempted to distribute it in Trego and Ellis County, Kansas.

Bender faces a maximum of twenty years on federal prison, without parole, for conspiracy to distribute cocaine; a maximum of twenty years for each count of distributing cocaine; a minimum of five years and a maximum of forty years for attempting to distribute more than 1.1 pounds of cocaine; and a minimum of five years for possessing a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime. Sentencing is set for September 13, 2004, at 10:00 a.m. Bender remains on bond awaiting sentencing.

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Co-defendant **Steven C. Babcock**, 29, Logan, Kansas, entered a guilty plea on May 3, 2004, to one count of conspiracy to possess with the intent to distribute cocaine from March 22, 2003, through March 25, 2003. Babcock faces a maximum of twenty years in federal prison without parole. Sentencing is set for July 27, 2004, at 10:30 a.m.

Co-defendant **Frank H. Casto**, 34, Quinter, Kansas, entered a guilty plea on May 7, 2004, to one count of conspiracy to possess with the intent to distribute cocaine from March 22, 2003, through March 25, 2003; two counts of distributing cocaine; and one count of attempting to distribute more than 500 grams (more than 1.1 pounds) of cocaine. Casto faces a maximum of twenty years in federal prison, without parole, for conspiracy and for each count of distributing cocaine and a minimum of five years and a maximum of forty years for attempting to distribute more than 1.1 pounds of cocaine. Sentencing is set for July 27, 2004, at 1:30 p.m.

Melgren commended the excellent work of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation in this investigation and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Lanny Welch and Mona Furst in this prosecution.